Testimony for Hearing of the HASC Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities
on
"Strategies for Countering Violent Extremist Ideologies"
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by
Michael Doran
Visiting Professor
NYU Wagner School of Public Service

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Miller, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify again. Your letter of invitation asked for "recommendations on how to craft a whole-of-government approach to countering violent ideologies." I have studied this question from a variety of vantage points. I appear before you today as an academic, a Middle East expert who has published extensively on al-Qaeda's ideology. But the greatest value that I add to this discussion comes from my work in government. When I started at NYU Wagner one month ago, I ended three and a half years of government service that included work in three separate organizations. At the White House, I served as Senior Director for the Near East and North Africa; at the Pentagon, as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Support to Public Diplomacy; and at the State Department, as Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. In each one of these positions, countering violent extremism was one of my core responsibilities.

My multi-agency experience taught me that the question that you are posing is in fact the key problem that we need to address at this stage. I am very grateful that you have focused on it, and I am equally thankful that you have given me this opportunity to share with you my thinking on the subject.

Let me begin by stating a simple truth: the biggest challenge to crafting a whole-of-government approach is the fact that we have no clear leader for this effort. No office has been given the necessary power to pull together all of the relevant parts of the government.

Countering extremism is part of a larger enterprise. For the sake of discussion, let's call it "strategic communication." This is an imperfect label for what we are talking about, but I do not want to get bogged down in definitional debates. When I say "strategic communication," I mean the effective coordination of all of the activities of government that are intended to persuade, inform, and influence foreign audiences.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States government got out of large parts of the strategic communication business. Since 9/11 we have been groping our way back in the dark. It need not be this difficult. Strategic communication is not totally alien to our democracy. A number of our most respected modern presidents were avid supporters and practitioners. I just

finished reading a book, entitled Total Cold War by Kenneth Osgood, about President Eisenhower's approach to the struggle with the Soviet Union. In Eisenhower's view, the Cold War, at its essence, was a global influence campaign. He organized the government for strategic communication, resourced the effort, and paid very close attention to it.

Eisenhower had at his disposal the kind of comprehensive system that is lacking today. To be sure, not all aspects of Eisenhower's influence machinery would be acceptable to us now. The value of Osgood's book is not that it provides a precise blueprint. Rather, it reminds us that if we did it once, we can do it again. In addition, it alerts us to the importance of presidential-level engagement.

The Obama administration can dramatically advance the enterprise simply by designating an office as the lead for government-wide strategic communication, vesting that office with the requisite authorities and resources to do its job properly, and holding it accountable for results.

Where should this office reside? One school of thought supports placing it at National Security Council. Appointing one of the president's advisors to monitor the enterprise is certainly a good idea, but doing so will not entirely solve the leadership problem. Those who argue in favor of the NSC ignore the strong (and healthy) aversion, which exists throughout our system, to an operational White House.

In addition, giving the NSC the lead is a recipe for gridlock. This fact is counterintuitive. One usually assumes that the closer one stands to the president, the greater one's ability to cut through red tape. Yes and no. When you raise up operational activities too high in the system, routine decisions become intertwined with more weighty issues. The easy question, "What should we broadcast to Iran?" becomes a proxy for the harder one, "What should our policy be toward Iran?" All work grinds to a halt. At the rarefied heights, the smallest steps are hard and sap one's breath.

Effective strategic communication does require some White House-level engagement, but it also requires empowering the field, pushing authorities and resources out to the operators, so that they are not required to look to Washington at every step to ask, "Mother may I?" Consequently, even if the White House does directly engage in this effort, we will still need a strategic-operational center in the government, an office that is resourced adequately to coordinate all relevant field activities.

Another school of thought favors resurrecting the United States Information Agency (USIA). There are strong arguments in favor of this proposal, but I am dubious. We are headed for a period of great economizing, and creating a new USIA is unlikely to play well in Peoria. Even if the political will for such a step does materialize, it will take years for the new bureaucracy to get up on its feet and successfully define its rightful place in the system.

In the meantime, let's develop proposals that we can enact today, without controversial new legislation. My preference is to build on existing structures, however imperfect they may be. They at least have the advantage of being recognized and understood by all the relevant players. The Bush administration gave the lead for strategic communication and countering violent extremism to the office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs – the "R" Bureau, as it is known in the nomenclature of the State Department. What if we were to retain this model and improve upon it?

The opponents of keeping "R" in the leadership role make two basic arguments. First, they claim that strategic communication cuts against the grain of the State Department, which harbors a deep bias in favor of quiet engagements, conducted behind closed doors, with the official representatives of foreign governments. We are asking State to behave out of character when we suggest that it should call out over the heads of those officials to the wider population. As one friend of mine says, "public diplomacy was placed in the State Department, because its name has the word 'diplomacy' in it. In reality, public diplomacy has about as much in common with diplomacy as lightning bugs have with lightning."

There is truth to this view, but it is important not to overstate the case. Ambassadors will always hold the final approval authority over activities conducted in their areas of responsibility. Sooner or later, all roads lead to the Department of State. So, we might as well begin our journey there.

The answer is not to remove strategic communication from the State Department, but, rather, to strengthen the influence of "R" inside the larger State organization. Currently, the office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs is too weak and narrowly focused to function as a fully effective strategic coordinator. The bureaus in "R" are the parts of USIA that remained after the organization's dissolution. As an independent agency, USIA had the ability to conceive and execute public diplomacy strategies on its own. It certainly had to coordinate with State, but it brought more clout to the table. "R" has lost that independent stature. The Under Secretary controls only a small budget and does not have oversight over the public diplomacy officers in the field. For their part, ambassadors are under no obligation to respect the strategic priorities as defined by "R."

The remedy for this imbalance is to turn "R" into a semi-autonomous agency within the State Department. It should be provided with greater discretionary resources, greater control over the existing public diplomacy budget, and greater power over all public diplomacy appointments, in embassies and as well as in the regional bureaus in main State. Convincing the regional bureaus to cede power to "R" will not be easy, but it is certainly less difficult than resurrecting USIA.

If the status of "R" were enhanced, its definition of its mission would also have to expand. Public diplomacy, as the discipline has developed historically, has become very closely

associated with telling America's story -- on conducting exchanges, and generally informing the world about American culture, politics, and society. In the Cold War, we faced off against a peer competitor who advocated an alternative political and social system. In that context, broadcasting the benefits of our way of life was a truly strategic communication, in the sense that it delegitimized our primary enemy. Telling America's story is still very important today, but it is no longer the sharpest edge of the strategic-communication spear.

Jim Glassman, the last person to serve as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, understood this fact well. He spoke eloquently and at length about the need to expand the definition of public diplomacy, and he developed programming designed to start the transformation. I won't repeat his arguments here, which are undoubtedly well-known to you already. Unfortunately, his term in the office was too short to complete the culture change that he started. Nevertheless, his orientation is well-documented and it offers a valuable directional signal that the Obama administration would do well to heed.

The key to Glassman's success was that he wholeheartedly embraced the notion that the business of Under Secretary is national security. By contrast, his predecessors viewed the position as a public relations portfolio. They shied away from associating with the Department of Defense (DoD) and other agencies. To his enduring credit, Glassman focused on using our soft power to achieve the national security goals of the United States. He interacted vigorously with DoD, exhibiting the kind of whole-of-government leadership that we need to turn strategic communication from an aspiration into a reality.

This brings me to the last point that I would like to make today: the contribution of the DoD to strategic communication. In recent months a number of voices in the media have warned against the encroachment of the DoD into public diplomacy. I can assure you that these warnings are based on inadequate information. My former office in the Pentagon, Support to Public Diplomacy, was designed to be the connective tissue between DoD and State. Its very existence is tangible proof of the desire, felt at the highest levels of the Department, to support State's leadership.

DoD is engaged in traditional military activities -- public affairs, information operations, and theater security cooperation engagements. Due to the pressures brought about by two wars and by the need to come to grips with the revolution in new media, these activities sometimes overlap with the public diplomacy mission of State. It is a fact of life that the lines of responsibility between the two Departments can never be demarcated with laser-like precision. DoD can certainly scale back in some areas, and State can ramp up in others. But the fact remains that it is in the nature of the world today that the two Departments are bound to rub against each other.

The answer to this problem, in my view, is to develop thicker connective tissue between the State and DoD, especially in the fields related to strategic communication. Exactly what I

mean by “thicker connective tissue” is itself a subject for another discussion – one that would touch on mutual training, compatible planning processes, and institutional reorganizations. We need not go into those details now. My main point today is that closer coordination will not take place until we create a strategic-operational center in the government that can act as an effective proponent for a whole-of-government effort. And with that point, I circle right back to where I began: with all roads leading through the Department of State.